

STATEMENT

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT of AGRICULTURE

**BEFORE THE
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SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS & PUBLIC LANDS
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CONCERNING:

No Child Left Inside: Reconnecting Kids with the Outdoors

Thank you for the opportunity today to provide the Department's view on how we are reconnecting kids with the Outdoors. I am Gail Kimbell, Chief of the United States Forest Service.

We understand the significance and benefit of connecting our citizens and youth to the natural environment. We are stewards of over 193 million acres of National Forest System lands. For over 100 years, we have been providing interpretive services, ranger talks, challenging summer outdoor work opportunities and educational programs for youth and adults, from the time that Gifford Pinchot our first Chief, assigned "Rangers" to protect and conserve our National Forests. Today we have a world class research organization that is devoting resources to examining the connections between our natural environment and the people that use our forests and grasslands, and a technical assistance program that assists urban and rural communities in connecting with nature.

The National Forests and Grasslands are the natural backyards for many communities throughout the 46 States that have National Forest System lands. These lands and our infrastructure of trails, roads and recreation facilities provide opportunities for solace and solitude, challenge and risk, hunting and fishing opportunities, outlets for keeping physically fit, and represent an important conduit for society's connection to nature.

Yet, even with the resources that we are devoting to this issue we still see perhaps one of the biggest threats to our nation's forests and grasslands is environmental illiteracy. As our country becomes increasingly diverse and urban, most of America's children grow up with little connection to the natural world. We are beginning to see trends in visitation to our National Forests, Grasslands that are revealing a downturn in the numbers of children

and adults that are participating in outdoor activities. Research showing us the benefits of connecting our children with nature and the health benefits of outdoor activities, requires us to examine approaches that will encourage greater participation in outdoor activities.

The Forest Service has many strong programs across the agency to address this situation and they reflect a growing recognition of the Forest Service's role and responsibility to foster the next generation of conservation leaders in conjunction with our partners. Our efforts not only strive to connect children with nature, they also emphasize building environmental literacy—the knowledge and skills needed to make informed decisions and become active citizens. There are far too many excellent efforts to reconnect our children with the outdoors that we are currently involved in to share during this brief testimony, but I would like to highlight a handful of projects and programs that illustrate the strengths of the Forest Service and describe how we are refocusing our efforts to reconnect our children to nature.

Connecting Children to Nature Through School Based Programs

A 2005 study conducted by the State Education and Environment Roundtable offers evidence to support the positive benefits on school achievement from environment-based study in schools. We are reinvigorating our conservation education program to focus on pre-K through 12th grade and their educators. We have developed in cooperation with the Department of Health and Human Services' Head Start Program, efforts that start with early childhood to instill the spirit of outdoor play through the use programs and materials related to Woodsy Owl and using Woodsy's ABC's as part of the Head Start program.

Every year, tens of thousands of desk-bound students become connected to nature through Forest Service science. The *Natural Inquirer*, a middle school science journal written directly from published Forest Service research, taps into and stimulates students' natural curiosity about nature. We are assisting educators through the "Forest for Every Classroom" program which is a year-long professional development program for educators focused on place based education. The teacher-developed curricula integrate hands-on natural and cultural explorations that address concepts in ecology, sense of place, stewardship, and civics. The program is currently operating in New Hampshire, Vermont and Texas and we are replicating the concept to other States.

Deep in the heart of the Hiawatha National Forest in Michigan is the Clear Lake Education Center. This center is a place for people of all ages to come and connect with their natural world through educational and recreational programs. Because of its realized contribution to the achievements of students, the program is largely funded from nearby school districts.

Connecting Children to Nature Through Non-School Based Programs

One area of increasing focus for us is to address the need to engage urban and minority youth in nature based activities. Opportunities to explore nature can begin once a student walks out their door. The Forest Service has broad authorities that allow our programs to work across the landscape from inner city neighborhoods to federally designated wilderness areas. Through our Urban and Community Forestry Program (UCF) we help to connect young people to nature on municipal, county and state public lands. We work with community volunteers, state forestry agencies, not-for-profit organizations and other associations to plant trees and turn abandoned lots and brownfields into neighborhood parks that are a magnet for kids.

One of the more successful urban connections is the Chicago Wilderness consortium. With over 200 partners, including the Forest Service, Chicago Wilderness is positioned to coordinate programs connecting urban children to nature. Chicago Wilderness consists of 225,000 acres of protected natural areas stretching from southeastern Wisconsin, through northwestern Illinois and into northwestern Indiana. These lands contribute to the conservation of global biodiversity, and enrich local residents' quality of life. Chicago Wilderness is also a place for people to explore, relax, learn, restore and appreciate the wonders of the natural world. Volunteers of all ages help to protect and restore wildlife habitat in preserves, inform others about nature and collect scientific data on the health of local ecosystems. These woodlands, wetlands, and prairies are as much a part of the region's identity as its art, music and architecture. Chicago Wilderness makes the area a great place to live and work, and it provides solace, inspiration, and education to diverse ethnic groups.

The Forest Service NatureWatch Program has been in existence for over 20 years. National programs include Kids Fishing Days, Migratory Bird Day, Every Species Counts and Animal Inn as well as several partnership initiatives. These and other initiatives have garnered awards for their excellence and cooperative spirit as we partner with national and local conservation organizations such as the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Audubon, and Boone & Crocket Club, local communities and governments, youth organizations, and volunteers.

The Health Connection

National Health and Nutrition Examination Surveys conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at the Department of Health and Human Services document the rapid increase in childhood obesity. Being overweight or obese increases the risk of many diseases and health conditions, including the early onset of chronic diseases such as type II diabetes and heart disease. Physical inactivity is a contributing critical factor to this issue. In 2002, President Bush launched his HealthierUS Initiative aimed at increased personal fitness.

The National Forests and Grasslands offer a wide array of outdoor settings and opportunities to provide avenues for healthy physical activities. We boast over 140,000 miles of a system of trails and routes, which provide diverse opportunities to get outside to exercise and experience the outdoors. Our recreational service providers operating under special use authorizations provide opportunities for such activities as downhill skiing, river rafting, hunting and fishing, horseback riding, rock climbing, outdoor experiential education and much more. We fill an important role in meeting the needs for outdoor experiences which can lead to healthier lifestyles.

We have several community efforts aimed at promoting outdoor recreation as a natural way to combat inactivity and sedentary lifestyles that can contribute to obesity. “Be Active Bitterroot” is an offshoot of the HealthierUS Initiative. The Bitterroot National Forest, the Bitter Root Resource Conservation & Development (RC&D) Area and many other local partners including the health sector, recognized the potential benefits that could be generated by combining interests in children’s health issues with the hopes and concerns we share regarding the health of natural resources surrounding our communities.

“Get Fit Great Falls” is working with our Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center, Lewis and Clark National Forest in Montana. Together they have several events, such as "Fit for the Trail" which commemorated and re-created the games and outdoor activities that Captain William Clark used to keep his men in shape while waiting for the snows to melt. Over 1,000 children and adults spent the day outdoors learning traditional Indian games and some European games like quoits. This June, “Get Fit Great Falls” will host a National Trails Day event to provide educational information about outdoor opportunities on national and state lands, as well as blood pressure screenings, free healthy food and juice donated by local vendors and local distributors

Researching the Value of Connecting Children with Nature

The Forest Service Research and Development program has supported the development of the academic field of environmental psychology. Through this research, connections between people and nature are being identified that could bring important and beneficial changes to communities and individuals. Forest Service supported scientific research studies conducted by the Landscape and Human Health Laboratory of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign suggests symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in children are relieved after contact with nature. Kids are better able to complete tasks and follow directions after playing in natural settings. Other Forest Service supported studies at the Urbana-Champaign campus have found that higher self-discipline in girls results from increased exposure to nature and that green views and access to green spaces in urban areas may, in fact, help strengthen community relations, relieve the everyday pressures of living in poverty and reduce crime.

It is important to determine the effectiveness of tools to enhance the connection of youth to the outdoors. A one-day pilot study was conducted, during which diverse youth from the Los Angeles basin participated in two technology dependent (camera safaris and geo-caching) and two non-technology dependent (etchings and nature scavenger hunt) activities at the Boys Camp at Griffith Park. The goals of the project were twofold: to determine whether technology matters in youth outdoor participation, and to develop a process by which other entities can replicate youth days across the country. Pilot study results indicate the youth participants liked all four activities, with the youth casting the most votes for the technology-dependent activities (camera safaris and geo-caching). Replication guidelines are being developed for use across the U.S.

The Forest Service has taken the lessons learned from work in the inner city neighborhoods and broadened them to cities and suburbs around the country. Eight out of ten Americans live in cities or suburbs and need easy access to parks and forests to fulfill daily needs for exercise, recreation community building and spiritual renewal with nature. Research shows that two in three do not have access to nearby parks, playgrounds or open space. Most children and adults don't have daily access to national forests, so many rely on everyday parks to keep them healthy. We believe that all children need safe, accessible and engaging places to play and explore nature. With that in mind the Forest Service has helped to fund research to examine the value that a park system brings to a city.

Connecting More Children to Nature

Based on what we have learned through research and experience, we are taking additional steps beyond those I have described to you to addressing the issues of reconnecting our youth with nature. On Tuesday May 22, 2007 we participated in a special event hosted by the National Forest Foundation, the American Recreation Coalition and ReserveAmerica. At the event we announced the national recipients of the Forest Service More Kids in the Woods challenge cost share program. This program is designed to engage children in recreation activities and nature-based learning to establish meaningful and lasting connections with nature.

For the first year of this effort, we are able to award \$510,000 in matching funds to leverage over \$1.0 million in partner contributions for projects that reconnect children with nature. Examples of the recipient projects include: The Harlem Link Charter School in New York City, to introduce students to nearby forest and wetlands, thereby, bringing real world experiences to complement the school's academic subject areas. The Poudre School District North of Denver, Colorado, hosts a three-day "Eco-week" experiential residential camp where underserved students can learn about ecological and stewardship principles, teambuilding and begin to develop a connection with the natural world. The Salish-Kootenai College in Polson, Montana, where an American Indian Math and Science Camp will engage the interest of tribal children in math and science in the context of their traditional culture. The camp annually serves about 70 6th graders from the Flathead Indian Reservation.

In summary, the Forest Service provides a diverse spectrum of programs, projects, research and a unique land base to help meet the concerns brought up by your committees on reconnecting children to nature. I am proud of the efforts put forth by our employees and partners. We have more work to do to address these issues and we continue to support these efforts within the resources we have. I believe our work with children is critical to the long-term health of the lands under our stewardship, and to the Forest Service. This concludes my testimony, I would be happy to answer any questions that the committee members may have.